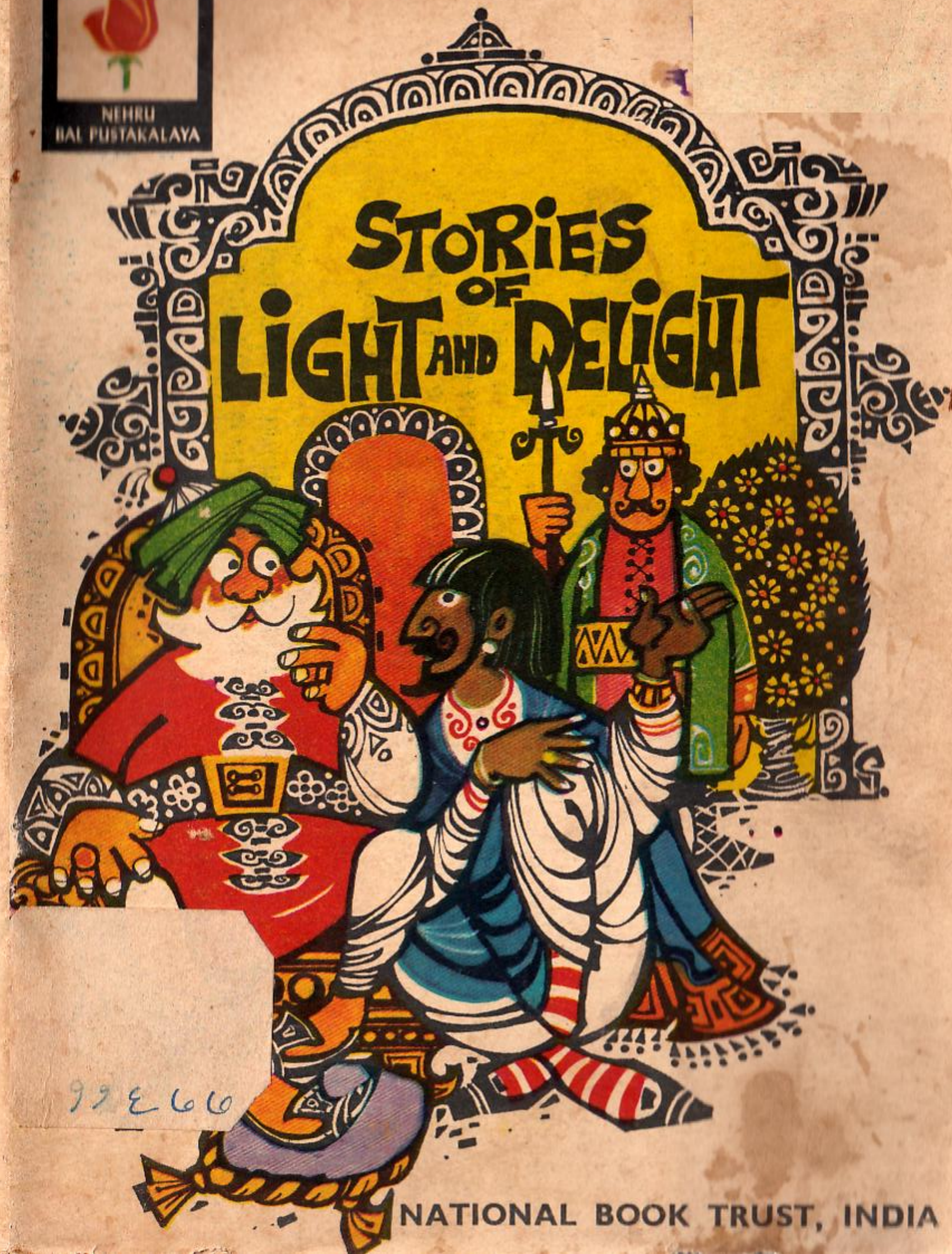




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STORIES OF LIGHT AND DELIGHT

MANOJ DAS

Illustrations
MARIO



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THE KING AND THE SQUIRREL

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a king who was very proud of his matchless position. He was young, well-read and intelligent and none of the youths of his kingdom equalled him in strength or valour. Moreover, he was the richest man in the kingdom.

One day, while strolling in his garden, he said to his wise, old minister, "I am sure no one would ever dare to boast before me. I am glad that I am superior to everybody in every respect."



The old minister, who generally agreed with everything the young King said, did not reply. He did not even smile.

The King was very surprised. "Why, my good minister, why do you keep quiet?" he asked.

The minister smiled and replied, "My noble Lord, to be quite frank, you can never be sure that no one will ever boast before you. Though it is a fact that you are superior to everyone in the kingdom, it is quite possible that there are some people who will not realise this. Everybody has his own vanity. Often it is seen that even a weakling considers himself the boldest of knights. So somebody, ignorant of your superiority, may boast before you some day. It would be wisest to ignore him. To take notice of the vanity of others is to lose one's own peace of mind."

While the minister was talking, a tiny squirrel jumped forward and climbed a marble column in front of them. In his front paws, he held high a coin to show to the King and the minister.



The King was amused. On seeing the King's smile, the squirrel chanted:

*I have got so much wealth
How much has the King?
Pity how he eyes me with
Jealousy and suffering!*

The King was furious. He rushed at the squirrel before the minister could say a word. The squirrel slipped away but dropped the coin. The King pocketed it and looking at the minister smiled with satisfaction. The minister, however, did not say anything.

That evening, the King and his minister were discussing some important problems with the ambassadors of the neighbouring kingdoms. Suddenly from above, they heard the squirrel chanting:

*If the King is so rich and so proud
It is with my wealth; I disclose this aloud!*

The King's blood boiled. He was enraged but he had to control himself as he was in the company of honoured guests. The squirrel hopped from pillar to pillar and repeated his verse. The ambassadors heard him, but did not laugh or say anything, lest the King feel offended.

After the guests had retired to their rooms, the King searched for the squirrel. He looked everywhere but could not find him. Anger made him restless and he could not sleep at night.

The King always began the day by giving alms to the poor. The next morning, while he was distributing alms, the squirrel appeared near the door and chanted:

How proudly he distributes alms!

But is it not my wealth that adorns his palms?

The King asked his attendants to capture the squirrel. But the squirrel managed to slip away. The poor King had to conceal his anger once again.

A few hours later, when the King was just about to lunch, the squirrel peeped through the window and chanted:

Is it not funny

That with my money

Many a dish

The King would relish!

The King was so enraged that he could not swallow even a morsel of food. His attendants rushed around trying to capture the squirrel. But the squirrel was nowhere to be seen.

Early that night, just when the King was about to start his dinner, the squirrel appeared in front of him and re-



peated the verse that had made the King give up his lunch.

The King felt absolutely helpless. He took out the squirrel's coin from his pocket and hurled it at him. The squirrel picked it up immediately. But on leaving, he chanted:

Victory to myself, the mighty squirrel

To all the people I can tell

The King did return all my wealth

Out of fear for my strength!

Like a mad man the King ran after the squirrel. But again the squirrel disappeared. Once again the King had a sleepless night. Throughout the night, the squirrel's words haunted and taunted him.

In the morning, the King told the minister, "I think I shall summon all my soldiers and order them to kill all the squirrels in the kingdom. There is no other way for me."

The minister replied, "My Lord, I understand your anger. But there is no certainty that our soldiers will succeed in killing all the squirrels in the land. There may be millions of them spread over our cornfields, in the dense forests of our land where men cannot enter, and on the lofty peaks of our mountains. Besides, a squirrel does not need a passport to enter our country. So squirrels from neighbouring lands may pour into our kingdom. Our soldiers, who are so brave in battle, would feel disappointed and unhappy when asked to fight squirrels and more so when they see that they are not altogether successful. Then, if by chance, the naughty squirrel which is teasing you escapes, all our efforts will be wasted. And what will your people say and the future historians write about you? Would it not be funny for the students of tomorrow to read: Once upon a time, there was a king who led his army against squirrels!"



"Then what should I do?" asked the harassed King.

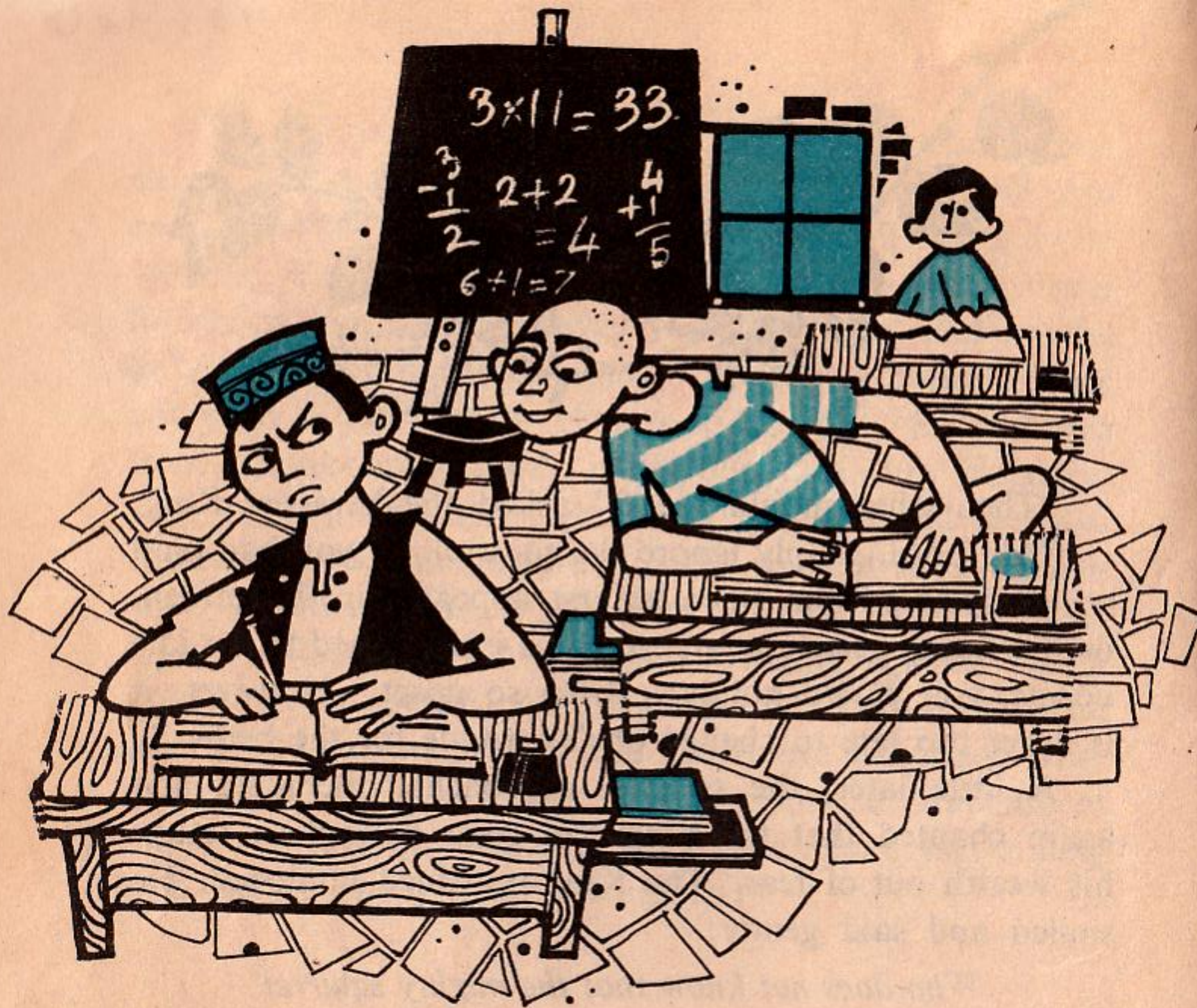
"My Lord, simply ignore the squirrel. If you had paid no attention to him when he first appeared in the garden, or if without getting angry you had just listened to his idle boasts, you would not have been so upset. However, it is never too late to change one's attitude for the better."

A little later, the squirrel approached the King and again chanted that the King had been obliged to return his wealth out of fear. The King remained unmoved. He smiled and said gently:

*Who does not know that the mighty squirrel
In wealth and wisdom can easily excel
A king or a monarch, as the yawn of a hen
Excels in expanse the mighty ocean?*

The squirrel was taken aback. He looked at the King in surprise. Then without another word, he vanished and was never seen again.





THE WHISPER

MANY, MANY YEARS AGO, in a small village there lived two boys, Raghu and Raju. They were of the same age and studied in the same school.

Raghu was honest and hardworking. Both his parents and his teachers were proud of him. But Raju was different. He was clever but dishonest. He cheated in his examinations and copied the answers of the other pupils. He only loved himself but was adept in deceiving people with false smiles and sweet words.

Raju disliked Raghu because Raghu refused to help him. Raju had often asked his assistance when he wanted to steal or cheat. But Raghu always said, "Whenever you need my aid for good deeds, I will gladly help you. But I will not assist you in wrong-doing."

After completing their studies, Raju left to live in a large town. Raghu lived modestly in his small village, looking after the few acres of land he had inherited from his father. He was very popular and was much loved by the villagers.

Many years passed. Raghu and Raju's paths did not cross—no occasion arose for them to meet again. But one day, news reached Raghu that the King impressed by Raju's cleverness had appointed him Prime Minister. Raghu was not happy to hear this because he knew Raju was dishonest. Neither was he unhappy as he never worried about what did not concern him.

Now one day, Raghu had to go to the town to buy goods for a festival in his village. He reached the town at noon. It was very hot and Raghu was tired and thirsty. Seeing a palatial building nearby, he entered it and was about to ask a servant for a glass of water. Just then, the owner of the house appeared and exclaimed in surprise, "Raghu, what are you doing here?" Raghu could hardly recognise Raju. Raju was sumptuously dressed—robes of the finest silk fell in great folds as he advanced, gold necklaces and diamond rings glittered in the sunlight and a dazzling turban of gold and silver with a sparkling sapphire in its centre adorned his head. Moreover, Raju had become as fat and as round as a tub.

Raghu greeted Raju. But Raju did not reply. Instead he said pityingly, "How miserable you look, Raghu! And what wretched clothes you wear! And I suppose that you have come all this way on foot. It's sad that you don't even have a mule to ride if not a horse. Now look at me! See how I look! Like a king, don't I? And look at my clothes. And look at my house. Even the gods envy me. It is only through merit that I have risen to this position. But you being a blockhead, haven't even a mule."

"I may be poor," Raghu replied, "but I am quite contented. And you know that I am not a blockhead. If I wanted, I could become as rich and as powerful as you. But I would hate to use your methods."

"Shut up!" screamed Raju. "If you are that able, then why have you come to beg at my house?"

"I have not come here to beg," replied Raghu. "I was thirsty and I only came to ask for a glass of water. I did not realise that this was your house."



"Not a drop of water for you. Get out!" shouted Raju in a voice shaking with fury.

"All right, *Bhaiya*, I am leaving," replied Raghu calmly, turning away.

But Raju was not satisfied. He ordered two servants to lift Raghu physically and throw him out on the street.

Then Raghu spoke with anger. "I have done you no harm. If you unnecessarily humiliate me, misfortune will befall you."

Raju shouted back, "You say you have done me no wrong? Did you not refuse to help me during the examinations? Well then? Now I will humiliate you to my heart's content. What can you do to me? You cannot punish me. I am the King's Prime Minister. All the other ministers are recruited by me. The King's Commander-in-Chief is my friend, the Treasurer is my father-in-law, the Chief Justice is my brother-in-law. Do you understand?"

"You will all come to a sticky end," Raghu replied as he was thrown out on the street.

A few months later, a bearded stranger approached the King when he was alone in his garden. After presenting many beautiful gifts to the King, the stranger said, "My Lord, every day I shall secretly give you fifty gold mohurs. In exchange, you must permit me every day to whisper anything I like to you for a few minutes while you are in your court."

"Well, I don't see any harm in that," replied the King.

The next day, while the King sat in his court with all his ministers and officers present, the stranger pushed his way up to him. The King beckoned him with a smile. The stranger with his lips almost touching the King's ear, whispered, "It is a lovely day today. The sun is shining brightly and there is not even a wisp of cloud in the sky."

But while he whispered, he glanced at Raju often. Then he slipped the gold mohurs into the King's pocket and left.

Raju, the Prime Minister, followed him and asked deferentially, "What were you discussing with the King, Honourable Sir? And why did you look at me so often?" This was just what the stranger, who was none other than Raghu in disguise, had predicted.

The disguised Raghu replied, "How can you ask me to disclose the secret the King and I share?"

Raju's fears redoubled. Kneeling down, he placed a hundred gold mohurs before Raghu. "I will give you another hundred gold mohurs in the evening. Please tell me the secret," he beseeched.

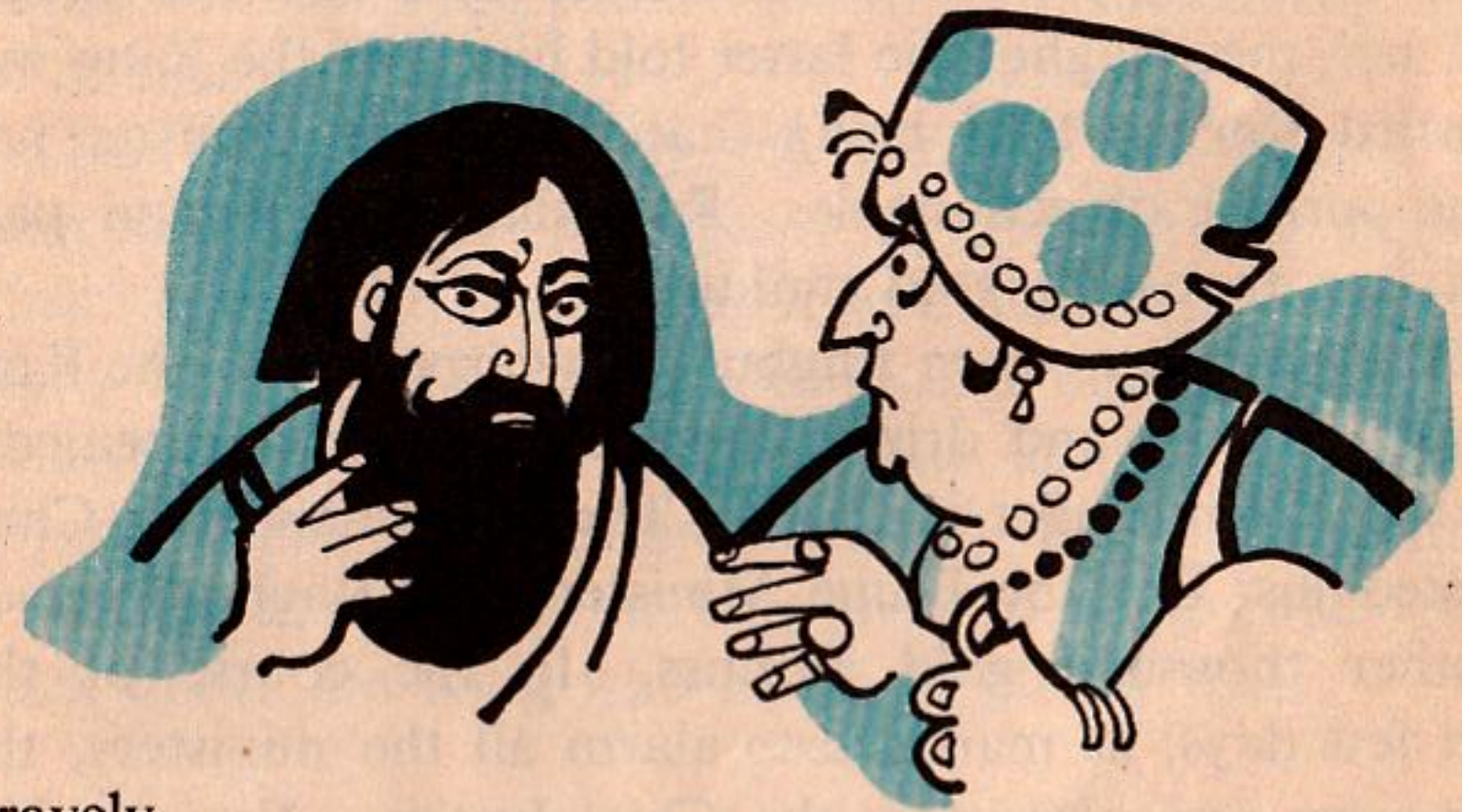
Raghu pretended reluctance. But after some persuasion said, "The matter is very serious. Several people have reported to the King that you are corrupt. The King has asked me to inquire into the charge."

"And what did you report to the King today, Honourable Sir?" asked Raju anxiously.

"I told the King that I was still looking into the matter," replied Raghu.

"Have mercy on me, Honourable Sir! I will give you one thousand gold mohurs," promised Raju.

"I shall see what I can do for you," said Raghu



gravely.

The next day, Raghu met the King again and whispered into his ear, "Early this morning the wind blew fiercely from the north. Now it seems to have a north-east direction." But while he was whispering, he looked repeatedly at Raju. The King smiled at the nonsensical words of the stranger. He was pleased to get fifty gold mohurs daily in return for such a trifling favour.



When Raju, with a heart as tormented as a fish caught in a net, met Raghu, the latter told him that the King was satisfied for the time being that the Prime Minister had done nothing objectionable. Raju thanked him and paid him one thousand gold mohurs.

The next day, when Raghu was whispering to the King about the mist and drizzle outside, he looked repeatedly at the Commander-in-Chief. The Commander-in-Chief reacted just like the Prime Minister. So Raghu received another thousand gold mohurs. In the course of the next few days, he managed to alarm all the ministers, the Treasurer, and ultimately the Chief Justice. For the fifty gold mohurs he gave to the King every day, he accumulated more than ten thousand gold mohurs.

Then one day, when the court was crowded, and courtiers, officers and commoners were all present, Raghu stood before the King and said, "My Lord, all these days I have whispered nonsensical words into your ears. Today this bag will unfold something useful."

With these words, he threw down a silken bag in front of the King. The clanging of ten thousand gold mohurs sounded like a melodious whisper to the King's ears. The King smiled. He thought the stranger a little odd but asked, "Would you please explain?" 99 E 6 6

Raghu narrated all that had happened and pointing at the mohurs, he said, "This is conclusive proof of the falsehood which surrounds you. If the Prime Minister and other ministers had been honest officers, if the Commander had done his duty faithfully, if the Treasurer and the Chief Justice had been incorruptible, then they would not have been panic-stricken simply because I looked at them."

The King immediately realised that his officers were unworthy of their positions. They were all corrupt. Their conscience was not clear and guilt kept them constantly in fear. The careers Raju and his colleagues had built on deceit and lies collapsed then and there. The King appointed Raghu his Prime Minister. Soon Raghu found a team of honest, hardworking men to occupy the vacant posts under the King who had now grown wiser.





A VISIT TO A STRANGE LAND

MANY YEARS AGO, in a distant land, there dwelt an old trader and his son Arjun. One day, the old trader said, "*Beta*, here are two horses of high pedigree. I have reared them carefully and in a country where there is a scarcity of good horses, they should fetch at least one hundred gold mohurs each. To the far south lies such a country. Now that I am old, I am unable to travel so far. But if you are brave enough to undertake a long journey through unknown lands, you can take the horses to the King of that southern country and he may give you an even higher price for them."

Arjun was full of enthusiasm at the prospect of traveling to distant lands. But his father cautioned, "Remember, never go westward. If you do, you may come across a certain country where all the people are rogues. No outsider has ever returned from that land unmolested. I once went there. But the price I paid for my folly was too high for me ever to forget."

Arjun begged his father to narrate what had happened when he went to the Land of Rogues. The old man replied, "Do you remember playing with an elder brother when you were a child? Fifteen years ago I went on a trading mission and visited several places. I took along your elder brother who was only fourteen years old. I thought that seeing distant lands and the way people lived would be a good education for him.

"On our homeward journey, we had the misfortune to enter an unfamiliar country. We arrived in the evening and spent the night at an inn. I deduced from the way people talked and behaved that we had come to the Land of Rogues which many travellers had warned me against. So I was anxious to leave as soon as possible.

"Early next morning, as I was paying the inn-keeper, his brother came running up. He was wailing and bemoaning his fate. He held me responsible for his wife giving birth to a still-born child. My astonishment knew no bounds. The rogue claimed that when I dismounted from my horse the previous evening I was breathing very heavily. A tiny insect which was flying out of the inn, changed its direction under the impact of my breath. It flew into the room where the inn-keeper's sister-in-law

sat. She was expecting a child. The insect flew into her nostril. She sneezed and as a result her unborn child died.

"Before I could answer such an absurd accusation, a crowd gathered. Everyone supported the man. I was completely staggered. They snatched my son away from me, as they insisted that I was responsible for the still-born child. My poor son must be serving as their slave to this day."

As he was recounting the incident, the old man wept. Saddened by his father's sorrow, Arjun said reassuringly, "Rest assured, *Pitaji*, I will never go near the Land of Rogues."

Arjun left for the country which lay to the far south, taking the two beautiful horses with him. After a few days, he came to a river-bank. The river was in flood and the ferryman refused to take the horses in his small boat. He insisted that if Arjun went westward, he would come across a boatman with a stronger boat.



Arjun turned his steps westwards. Suddenly a cyclone burst forth. He looked in vain for shelter. Then he saw a column of smoke rising from the other side of a nearby mountain. Holding his two horses and with great difficulty, he climbed the mountain.

The cyclone had just subsided. Looking down, Arjun saw a village. Since he had come a long distance towards the west, it occurred to him that the village might be a part of the Land of Rogues. He decided to turn back. But curiosity got the better of him. What sort of people lived in this fabled land? He leaned forward from the edge of the mountain to have a closer look. His foot slipped on a piece of loose rock and he fell headlong down



the mountain. He rolled downwards right into the village. His horses galloped down and stood by his side.

An old man who was passing came running up to him. Arjun stood up. Fortunately he had not suffered any major injury. However, he was pleased to see that the old man was looking at him carefully. He thought to himself, "Even in this Land of Rogues, there are people who show some concern for others."



Arjun was just about to thank the old man for his concern when suddenly the old man started wailing. He had seen a frog crushed to death under Arjun's weight. He wept and lamented, "O my sweet little frog, O my child, how am I to avenge your death?" As he cried, many villagers gathered. They spoke to the old man in a strange language. Then, turning to Arjun, they explained that the old man, who had no child, had adopted the frog. The domesticated frog was famous for his dutifulness and devotion to his father. No wonder the old man felt utterly heartbroken and forlorn at the demise of the land's most wonderful frog.

Very soon a number of villagers joined in the old man's wailing. Arjun did not know what to do. He wanted to leave the place at once. He asked the people what would pacify the old man.

The old man suddenly spoke, "Give me one of your horses."

"What? A horse for a frog?" Arjun queried angrily.

The old man replied, "Young man, I do not understand you. Can a horse ever be more valuable than a son?"



Ultimately our young trader had to surrender one of his beautiful horses to the rogue. With a heavy heart, he left the village. But as it was difficult for him to climb the mountain again, he walked a short distance to see if he could find a pass through to the other side.

Soon he came across another small village at the foot of the mountain. He was hungry and thirsty. He went to the nearest house and knocked. A one-eyed man answered and Arjun asked him for some food and water.

The one-eyed man said, "I cannot give you any food. But I can give you enough water to fill your belly. What is really necessary is somehow to fill the belly, isn't it?"

Arjun drank the water and thanked him. Just as he was on the point of departing, the one-eyed man asked where he came from and his father's name. No sooner had Arjun replied than the one-eyed man caught his arm and exclaimed, "At last I have got you! Now listen, young man. Twenty years ago, I went to your country to trade. Unfortunately all my money was stolen. I knew your father very well. I asked him for a loan of two mohurs. He agreed but not without some security. I had nothing to give him. So he proposed that I deposit one of my eyes with him. I was so badly in need of money that I allowed him to dig out one of my eyes. Your father promised to come to this country after a year and return my eye. But twenty years have passed. Now, I have got you. Give me back my eye. A son is bound to repay the debts of his father. I am prepared to return the two mohurs I borrowed from your father and also a third mohur as interest. But you must give me back my eye."



Soon the one-eyed man had gathered around him several supporters. Arjun, on the verge of tears, said, "I do not know anything about your eye. However, tell me what I have to do and let me go."

"You can leave," replied the one-eyed man, "but without your horse."

Arjun had to leave his horse behind and walk away. His body pained because of his fall from the mountain and his heart ached due to the loss of both his precious horses. Pangs of hunger prevented him from walking far. He sat under a tree and wept.

A young man passing by stopped and asked, "Who are you? Why are you crying?" But Arjun did not reply. He was now afraid of speaking to anyone from that country. The stranger was persistent and appeared very kind. So Arjun narrated briefly how he had lost his horses. The stranger was silent for a while and then said, "Let us go to the King. I will see that you get back your horses."

Arjun hesitated at first. But since he had nothing more to lose, he accompanied the stranger to the King's palace. On their way, the stranger taught Arjun what to say before the King.



After hearing Arjun's complaint, the King summoned the old man and the one-eyed man. Then the trial began. After the old man had declared that the dead frog was his adopted son, Arjun brought out a live frog from his turban. Turning to the King, he said, "My Lord, I have just adopted this frog. I propose that I should leave this frog at the foot of the mountain. Let the old man roll down from the top of the mountain as I did and fall upon my frog-son and kill him."

The King agreed. "That is quite fair. No one can doubt the wisdom of this proposal. This is the right solution for the old man."

The old man was by no means prepared for this. Without another word, he returned the horse to Arjun and left.

Then it was the one-eyed man's turn to state his case. In his own defence Arjun replied, "My Lord, my father undoubtedly had very strange hobbies. One of them was to collect people's eyes. In fact, there are hundreds of eyes in our store-room. I am prepared to return this gentleman's eye. But it is not possible for me to find the correct eye unless I take his present eye and match it. So I propose to dig out his remaining eye and take it back with me. Soon I will be able to return both his eyes intact."

"A very sensible idea," said the King. Needless to say the one-eyed man returned the horse immediately and

did not show the least interest in getting back his lost eye.

Then the stranger said to Arjun, "I will accompany you till the border of this country to ensure that you are not harassed any more."

While they walked along and chatted, Arjun discovered that the stranger was none other than his lost brother. The rogue and his wife who had kept him as a slave had recently died. Since then, he had waited for an opportunity to return to his land. Being familiar with the tricks of the people of the land, he knew how to deal with them.

Both brothers left the Land of Rogues. They went south, sold their horses at a very high price and returned home. Their father declared himself the world's happiest man.





THE ROYAL JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

A FAT, foolish king had a lean, sharp-witted minister. The minister claimed to be very wise and spent all his time flattering the King. The King believed that as long as this wise minister was by his side, he would have no worries.

The King often said to his minister, "Promise that you will never desert me." And the minister always replied, "Never, never, my Lord. Wherever you are—whether in this world, in heaven or in hell—I will always be with you, giving you sound counsel and solving all the world's problems for you." This pleased the King greatly.

One evening, the King was returning to his palace after strolling near the river-bank. Suddenly he heard a skulk of foxes yelping in the nearby forest. The King's curiosity was aroused. He wanted to know why the foxes were yelping.

He turned questioningly to his minister, "Why should so many foxes yelp at the same time, and that too just when my royal ears are obliged to hear their noise?"

The minister replied, "My Lord, as you know this winter has been specially bitter. The poor foxes have no warm clothes. They are appealing to you for blankets."

"I see. Thank you very much. He is a wise minister who can understand the sentiment of foxes. But why are these foxes without blankets?" demanded the King.

"Our officer in charge of relief works is to blame," replied the minister, who bore a grudge against the officer.

"How shocking! The officer in charge of relief works has deprived our valuable foxes of blankets? All right. Wrap up the officer in a blanket and throw him into the sea. Then buy a hundred blankets and distribute them among my friends the foxes," ordered the King.

With a great show of hurry, the minister left to do as the King had commanded. But he only obeyed the first half of the King's order. He put the officer to death. But though he took money from the royal treasury to purchase blankets, he never bought them.



The next evening, the King again heard the foxes yelping. He looked at his minister with great surprise and asked, "What is the matter? Why are our foxes yelping again?"

"For an entirely different reason, my Lord. They are yelping their thanks to you," replied the minister with a smile.

"How wonderful!" said the King. "This would never have struck me. I am sure that no king has a minister like mine! My noble minister, when you are with me, all the world's wisdom is at my finger-tips. My minister, give me the assurance that you will never leave me."

"Never," assured the minister. "I will be with you whether you are in heaven or in hell."

The King was very pleased. But his pleasure did not last long. Suddenly a little boar ran by. The King, who had never gone into the forest for shikar and had never left his little town, had never seen a boar before. With great astonishment, he asked the minister, "Good God! What creature is this?"

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The minister had often seen boars. But as usual, he wanted to take advantage of the King's ignorance. So he replied, "This is one of your elephants, my Lord. It is in this pitiable condition because the officer in charge of the elephants has neglected to feed it properly."

The King shook with fury. He immediately ordered that the officer should be put to death. Then he requested the minister to take as much money as was necessary from the treasury and see that the poor animal was restored to health.

Needless to say, the minister drew a large amount from the royal treasury but kept it for himself.

A month passed. One evening, it so happened that the King, when returning from a stroll, again came across the boar. He looked questioningly at the minister and asked, "Is this not the same starving elephant we saw the other day? How is it that it has not yet improved in health?"



The minister gave a grin broad enough to show all his wisdom teeth. "No. That elephant is now as round as your honourable self, my Lord. This creature is a mouse which has become so fat because it has been devouring the food in the royal kitchen. It shows how negligent the chief cook is," replied the minister.

The chubby face of the corpulent King turned as red as a ripe chilli-pod. He rolled his eyes and lamented, "What a pity that the health that should have been mine has gone to a mouse through the sheer negligence of the cook!"

He immediately ordered that after the cook had prepared the royal dinner, he should be hanged.


That evening, the cook secretly met the minister and gave him a lot of money. He also promised that whenever he would prepare a special dish for the King, he would send a portion of it to the minister.

The minister was very pleased. He assured the cook, "I will see that nothing happens to you. You need not worry."

At midnight just when the cook was about to be hanged in the King's presence, the minister rushed up, shouting, "Stop, please stop!"



Then turning to the King, he explained, "My Lord, I just consulted the almanac and found that this hour—midnight—is a very propitious hour. Anyone who is hanged now will find a berth reserved for him in heaven. My Lord, hanging the cook now would not be a punishment for him at all. It would be a reward. Why should we send to heaven a criminal who made a rat fat instead of you?"



The minister was sure that if he could somehow delay the hanging, then the King would completely forget about it. The King's memory was like a sieve.

But the King jumped for joy and said, "Good, very good. For a long time I have wanted to see heaven." Then turning to the hangman, the King commanded, "Put the noose around my neck and hang me quick!"

But as he was advancing towards the hanging noose, he suddenly stopped. Turning to the minister, he said, "My dear minister, you must keep your promise never to desert me. Please lead the way to heaven."

The King instructed the hangman to hang the minister first. Before the panic-stricken minister could utter a word, the hangman dragged him forward and the courtiers thrust his head into the noose. The King was delighted at the eagerness they displayed in obeying his orders.

As soon as they had hanged the minister, they turned to the King and hanged him too, as he had desired!



THE BOON OF BOONS

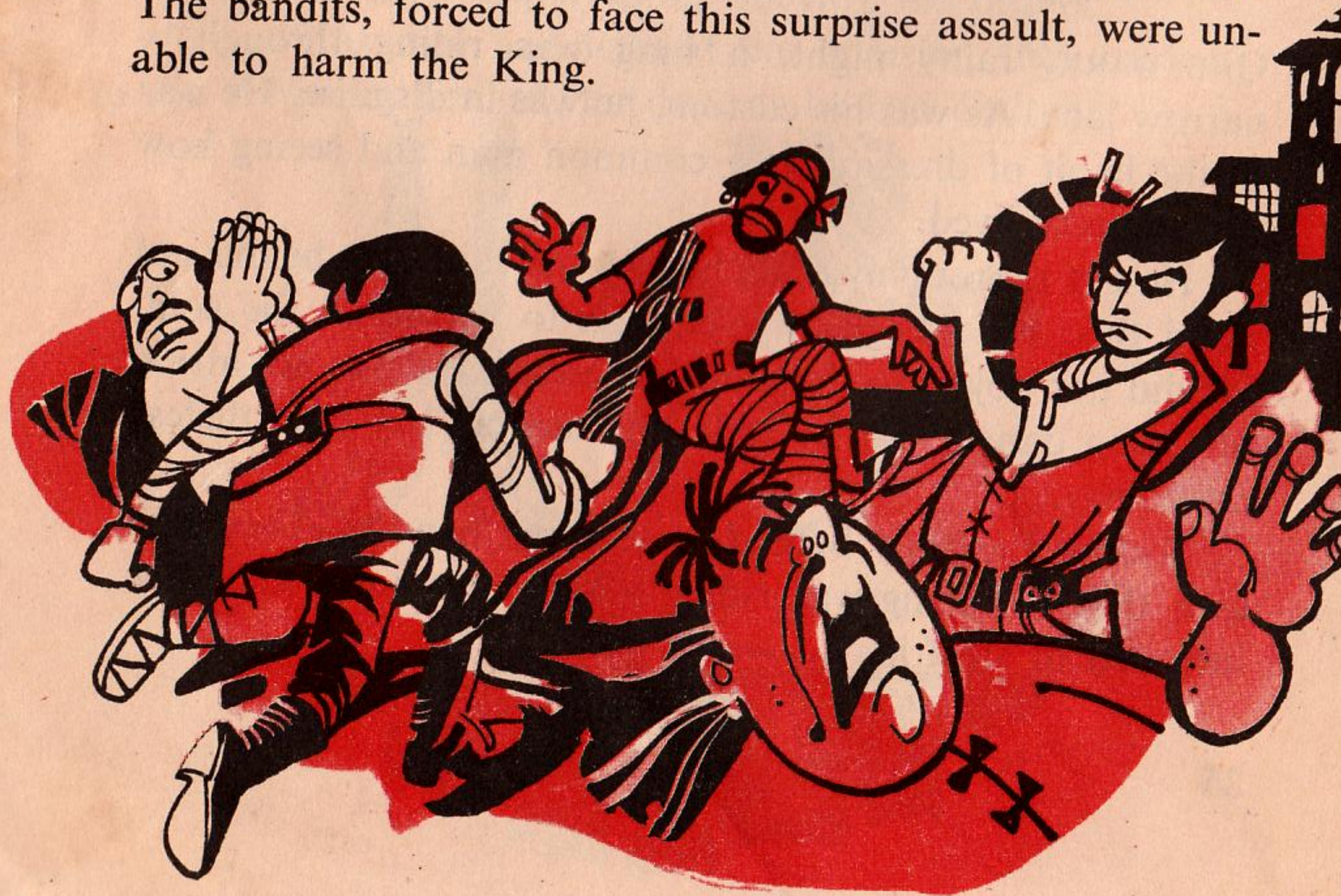
ONE DARK, rainy night, a king was riding through a narrow lane. As was his custom, he was in disguise. He was in the habit of dressing as a common man and seeing how his subjects lived.

He got thoroughly drenched by the rain. But he did not mind this. He was healthy enough to withstand the cold. He did not object to the darkness either. He was not afraid of facing danger. So he rode on leisurely but nevertheless cautiously.

Riding stealthily behind were some bandits. They had seen that the King was riding a very fine horse and they intended to steal it.



All of a sudden, the bandits surrounded the King. The King was taken by surprise, but he did not panic. Just as he was making his escape, however, his horse's hoof got stuck in a crack in the road. The bandits, who were more than a dozen in number, were just about to pounce upon him when six young men arrived on the scene and came to his rescue. They attacked the bandits from the rear. The bandits, forced to face this surprise assault, were unable to harm the King.



Whenever the King travelled incognito, some of his ablest bodyguards followed at a distance. The bodyguards now arrived. The bandits were soon cornered. They tried to escape but failed. The King's bodyguards captured them all without much difficulty.

The King was very pleased with the young men who had come forward to save him, though they had no idea that they were doing a great service to their King. After thanking them, the King insisted that they accompany him to his palace.

The young men had come from distant villages. They had become friends because they were staying at the same inn.

By morning, the news of the incident that had occurred the previous night was widely known. Everyone was delighted that the bandits had failed to harm their noble King. The members of the royal family, the ministers and courtiers and the public all praised the young men's courage.

When the King appeared in *darbar*, the six young men were brought before him. The King got down from his throne and embraced them. He expressed his desire to reward them for the help they had given him.

"Let each one ask me for the thing that would please him most. I promise to grant it instantly, unless it is beyond my power or capacity to confer," the King proclaimed.

The oldest of the six friends was asked to state his desire first. He thought for a moment and then said, "O great King, for a long time I have wanted to live in a comfortable house. So please, will you fulfil my wish?" The King immediately summoned the royal architect and in-

structed him to build a grand mansion for the young man.

The next young man wanted to be promoted to the rank of a nobleman. The King bestowed some titles upon him and made him one of his peers.



The third young man said, "My Lord, the people from my village come to town every week to sell vegetables. Because there is no good road between my village and the town, the villagers suffer, particularly during the rainy season. My prayer is, let there be a good road for the poor villagers." The King made a gesture of approval and the minister in charge of roads and bridges made a note of it.



When the fourth young man was asked to state his wish, he blushed and replied, "O great King, you are like my father. Please find me a beautiful bride." The King's jester had a beautiful daughter. The King asked the jester to give his daughter's hand in marriage to the young man. The jester happily agreed.

The fifth young man expressed a desire for money. Bags of gold were handed to him immediately.

At last came the turn of the sixth young man. He said, "My King, I want you to be my guest once a year until one of us dies."

Everyone was surprised at the strange wish of the young man. Many thought him a fool. Even to the King, the request appeared rather odd. But he had promised to fulfil any request unless it was beyond his capacity. So he agreed to spend a day and a night every year at the young man's house.

Now it was left to the various departments of the King's government to make adequate arrangements for the King's yearly visits to the young man's house.

First of all, it was necessary to build a good road—a royal road—to his village, so that the King's chariot could travel smoothly. Then the question was raised: How could the King live and sleep for several days and nights in a humble hut? So a luxurious castle was built for him worthy of the King. But how would he, with his meagre income, maintain the castle and play host to the King and his entourage? To solve this problem, he was given bags of gold and an annual allowance.

According to a long established convention, the King could only be a nobleman's guest. So, the young man was promoted to the rank of a nobleman with very special titles of honour bestowed upon him. He was as respected as any prince of royal blood.

There was yet one more factor to be considered. The lady who would be the King's hostess should be familiar with the King's habits and delicate tastes. To whom could they be more familiar than the King's daughter? Soon, arrangements were afoot to wed the princess to the young man.

Thus, asking but one boon, the young man got all that his five companions had obtained, and in fact much more.



A VERBAL TRADE

ONE EVENING, an old man was passing through a village. From the interior of a small house, he heard a sweet, melodious voice singing. He stood outside on the road till the song ended. Then he went near the house and looked inside. The singer was a small girl. He patted her affectionately and gave her a gold mohur.

The girl's father, Mohan, who was standing nearby, was delighted at the unexpected present. He snatched the gold mohur from his daughter's hand. As soon as the old man turned to leave, Mohan shouted, "Wait, what about the rest of my dues?"

The old man looked at Mohan with great surprise. Mohan continued, "You see, old man, the price for enjoying my daughter's song is not just one gold mohur but ten. Give me the rest. The sooner the better."

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It did not take the old man long to realise that Mohan was a rogue. But he feigned innocence and said, "Great father of the little musician! I am sorry to inform you that I have no more mohurs at the moment. What should I do?"

"You can give me your cap, your gold chain and your shoes!" replied Mohan.

"Certainly, your head which is so full of cleverness, deserves a cap and your neck, which supports such a blessed head, deserves a chain. But my friend, these are old and do not have much value. Why don't you accompany me to my house? I will gladly give you one hundred fresh gold mohurs. The one I gave you has lost its lustre. You can return that if you decide to come with me."

"One hundred gold mohurs! You are really a good man! How far is your house? Of course, I am ready to walk a thousand miles for a hundred gold mohurs!" said Mohan gleefully.

"That will be unnecessary. You have to walk only three miles," replied the old man.

Mohan returned the mohur he had received to the old man. Then he followed the stranger to obtain the promised hundred mohurs.

As they walked, Mohan exulted—it seemed as though he would burst with joy. "Do you know what I will do with the hundred gold mohurs?" he asked.

"No," replied the old man.

"I will build a castle which will surpass the King's palace in grandeur."

"Oh, I see!"



"And I will ask the King for his daughter's hand in marriage."

"But you are already married, and you already have a daughter!"

"So what? I will marry again, and this time none less than a princess!"

"Aha, I see!"

Soon they entered the town and arrived in front of the King's palace. Seeing the old man proceed towards the palace gate, Mohan asked, "Why are you going that way?"

"That is my house!" said the old man.

Mohan looked at the old man very carefully. He suddenly recognised him. He was the King. Mohan had failed to identify him before as the King was in disguise.

Mohan stood speechless. Then the King said politely, "Now you great father of the little musician, you can go. Your daughter's song gave me joy for five minutes. In return, did I not give you joy for one full hour with my promise of a hundred mohurs? Your daughter's verbal art gave me joy. My verbal promise gave you joy. Is that not a fair exchange? To continue, my joy was followed by disappointment when you showed your greed. Naturally, to make this deal still more just, I saw to it that your joy too was followed by disappointment. Now get out!"

Mohan returned to his village bemoaning the one mohur he had gained and which he had then lost.



THE BEST BRIDEGROOM OF ALL

ON THE BANKS of the river Sarayu, there lived a mendicant and his wife. They dwelt in a small hut, dressed humbly and ate whatever the people of the nearby villages gave them.





They had no children. The mendicant's wife wanted to adopt a child. The mendicant went from house to house in the neighbouring villages. But nobody would give them a child because they were so poor.

The mendicant may have been poor, but he possessed supernatural powers. One day, as he sat in front of his hut a mouse fell from the beak of a crow flying overhead. The mendicant's wife picked up the mouse and nursed it. Then turning to her husband, she said, "Since no one will give us a child, why don't you use your powers and change this mouse into a baby?"

The mendicant smiled in agreement. "I will do whatever pleases you," he replied.



The mendicant chanted a hymn and sprinkled sacred water from his *kamandalu* on the little mouse. The mouse instantly changed into a beautiful baby girl.

The mendicant's wife was overjoyed. She caressed the child and fed her the best food she could obtain. They affectionately gave the little girl the name Mousy.

Time passed and Mousy grew up. The mendicant and his wife did their best to make her happy and give her a good education. The girl learnt literature, mathematics, dancing and singing. When Mousy reached the marriageable age, the mendicant wanted to find a suitable bridegroom for her. His wife said to him, "You are so powerful, you made a beautiful girl out of a tiny mouse. Now you must prove your power again by finding the best bridegroom for our daughter."

"Certainly," replied the mendicant, "even the Sun will oblige me if I request him to marry our daughter!"

"Really?" asked his wife joyfully. "Are you that powerful? Well, in that case, I would very much like to have the Sun for my son-in-law. Now prove what you have said!"

"All right," replied the mendicant. He closed his eyes and began to meditate. Suddenly the Sun appeared before them. The mendicant requested the Sun to accept his daughter as his bride.

The Sun replied, "I have no objection to making your daughter my wife. But are you sure that she will like me?"

The mendicant sent for his daughter and consulted her. She replied, "*Pitaji*, the bridegroom you have chosen is very good. But he is too bright. Is there none better and greater than he?"



The mendicant could not think of anyone better and greater than the mighty Sun. Seeing him despondent and thoughtful, the Sun said, "I think the Cloud is better and greater than I, for does he not often succeed in dimming my brilliance and even hiding me from the earth?"

Saying this, the Sun took leave of them. Soon the Cloud appeared before the mendicant's hut. Now, instead of asking the Cloud if he would accept Mousy as his wife, the mendicant asked Mousy if she would take the Cloud for her husband.

Mousy looked at the Cloud for a moment and then said, "*Pitaji*, this bridegroom is good, but he is rather dark. Isn't there anyone better and greater than he?"

The mendicant looked questioningly at the Cloud. The Cloud replied, "The Wind can be considered greater and better than I for he often pushes me from one corner of the sky to the other."

The Cloud left and the next moment, the Wind appeared. Mousy looked at him and said, "*Pitaji*, this young man seems to be too fickle. Is there none better and greater than he?"

The mendicant looked anxiously around. The Wind then said, "Do not worry. The Mountain is certainly better and greater than I, for in spite of my great force, I can never disturb him. I think your daughter will be satisfied when she sees him."

As the Wind left, the Mountain appeared. After looking at the newcomer, Mousy said, "*Pitaji*, this candidate is not smart. Is there none better and greater than he?"

The Mountain immediately replied, "Of course, there is! What about the Mouse? He is the only creature who dares to bore holes through me. He should make an ideal partner for this ambitious girl."

As soon as the Mountain disappeared, the Mouse appeared. The moment Mousy saw him, she exclaimed with delight, "Oh *Pitaji*, this brave young lad is wonderful! Why is it that while the best and greatest bridegroom was within reach, you kept showing me the Sun and the Wind? However, dear *Pitaji*, please permit me to marry this excellent youth without delay!"

Mousy was married to the Mouse and left her foster-parents to live with her husband.

The mendicant's wife sighed and said in a perplexed tone, "What a pity! And I wanted only the best for her. But then Mousy chose herself what she considered the best!"





THE PRINCE WHO CHANGED HIS DESTINY

DEEP WITHIN a big forest lived a young boy, Kumar, and his mother. No other house was visible for miles around. Whenever Kumar looked out, all he saw was rows and rows of trees—oak, chestnut, elm and beech. And the only sounds he heard were the gentle murmur of streams, the cries of animals and the chirping of birds.

When Kumar was old enough to work, he spread nets at several places every evening. By morning, a musk-deer was trapped in one of his nets. Every two or three days, a trader from far away came. He took the deer and in exchange left food and clothes. He also brought Kumar palm-leaf books to read.



Occasionally boys of his own age came to the forest from distant villages to collect fruit, roots, and peacock-feathers. They loved Kumar. One day they said to Kumar, "We want to play and sing with you every day, but we cannot come to the forest whenever we like. It is too far away and the route is dangerous. Why don't you come and live with us? What is the point of living in such isolation?"

After his friends had left, Kumar ran to his mother. "*Mataji*, why do we have to live inside this dark forest? All my friends live near one another. Why don't we go and live among them?"

His mother did not reply. Kumar repeated his questions. Then his mother spoke, "We have to live in this forest forever. It is unsafe for us to go and live among other people. I cannot tell you anything more."

"You must tell me more, *Mataji*," Kumar entreated.

"No, *Beta*, if you hear more, you may feel unhappy," his mother replied.

"Never, I promise to remain cheerful, however sad your tale," Kumar said firmly.

His mother was again silent. But tears rolled down her cheeks. Kumar said gently, "*Mataji*, if it pains you, you need not tell me anything."

"No," his mother replied, "perhaps it is time that you know everything. If you understand, then maybe you will be more careful."

With these words, his mother began her story.

"We have been living in this forest since you were one year old. Naturally, you do not remember where we lived before. It will surprise you to know that we lived in a huge

palace because your father was the King of this country. You were his only child and should have succeeded to the throne. But fate was against us.

"The night you were born, the whole palace was festive. I was very exhausted and fell into a deep sleep. It was midnight when I awoke. My nurses and maids were all asleep. I slowly opened my eyes. To my great astonishment, I saw a luminous being leaving my chamber. I had heard that soon after a child was born, the God of Fate wrote on the child's forehead all that would happen to him in his life. The God of Fate usually came and went unseen. But there were rare moments when he was visible.



"I understood immediately that the luminous being before me was none other than the God of Fate. I arose quickly and kneeling before him, begged him to tell me what was in store for you. But he refused to divulge anything. I was adamant. I told him that unless he disclosed your fate, I would not let him leave. He was forced to yield. But his words of doom fell like a ton of bricks on my head. He told me that you were destined to live all your life as a poor man.

"Soon afterwards, your father, the King, died in an accident. The Prime Minister, who had become very powerful because of your father's faith in him, tried to kill both of us. Fortunately I came to know of his plans. To me your life was infinitely more precious than the kingdom. So one night I escaped to the forest. The wicked Prime Minister is now the King. He does not know that we live here. If he finds out, he may try to kill us. That is why I do not want to leave."

"The God of Fate assured me that though you would be poor, you would never starve. For it had been decreed that one musk-deer would definitely be trapped in your net every night. Every evening, for many years, I spread the nets. For the last two years, you have taken over this work. Though my heart breaks at the thought, yet I am afraid you will have to spend your life this way."

Kumar listened to his mother's tale with rapt attention. After a few moments' reflection, he spoke forcefully, "*Mataji*, it pains me that you who were once a queen and should have been by now the honoured mother of a king, have to live in this manner. As far as I am personally concerned, I have never known any other kind of life. Living in the forest does not upset me. But now that I know my background and the wickedness of the Prime Minister, I cannot remain unmoved. I must do something to win back my father's kingdom from the wicked clutches of the usurper."

His mother replied, "There is no point in getting vexed, *Beta*. This is what your fate has decreed."

"I must change my destiny," said Kumar in such a

determined tone that his mother thought it was wiser to keep quiet.

Kumar sat in silence for a long time, lost in thought. Then suddenly his face brightened. "Mataji, tell me, did the God of Fate assure you that I was destined to catch one musk-deer every night?"

"Yes," his mother replied.

"Very well. That will be the point from where to begin my fight with destiny," said Kumar.

That evening, instead of spreading ten nets at different places as was his custom, Kumar spread only five. Nevertheless, a deer was trapped in one of them. The next evening, he spread only one net. Even then, a deer was found trapped in it.

The next evening, instead of laying the net at any of the usual places, he spread it on the roof of his hut. Nevertheless a deer was found in it the following morning.

The next evening, Kumar hung the net on the top of an oak tree. The following morning a deer lay trapped in it.



The following evening, Kumar again hung the net on the oak tree but this time he also lit a fire around it.

Suddenly late at night, Kumar awoke. Someone was panting near his bed. A stranger stood before him luminous but half-burnt. It was the God of Fate.

"What do you mean by hanging the net on a tree and then lighting a fire all around? What mischief are you up to?" demanded the God of Fate angrily.

"I am not up to any mischief. I am only trying to stop the mischief of my father's Prime Minister. I want my kingdom back," replied Kumar.

"But you are fated to live as a poor man," protested the God of Fate.

"I am also destined to trap a deer every night in my net. I will lay my net wherever I want. How dare you complain about it?" Kumar demanded.



"But don't you see that because you are destined to trap a deer every night, I am obliged to carry a deer to the top of the tree and put it into your net? How long can I continue this way?" bitterly complained the God of Fate.

"Tomorrow I will lay my net on the highest tree in the forest and I will light a fire around that tree too. Not only that, I will also smear mustard oil on the tree," replied Kumar in an unconcerned voice.

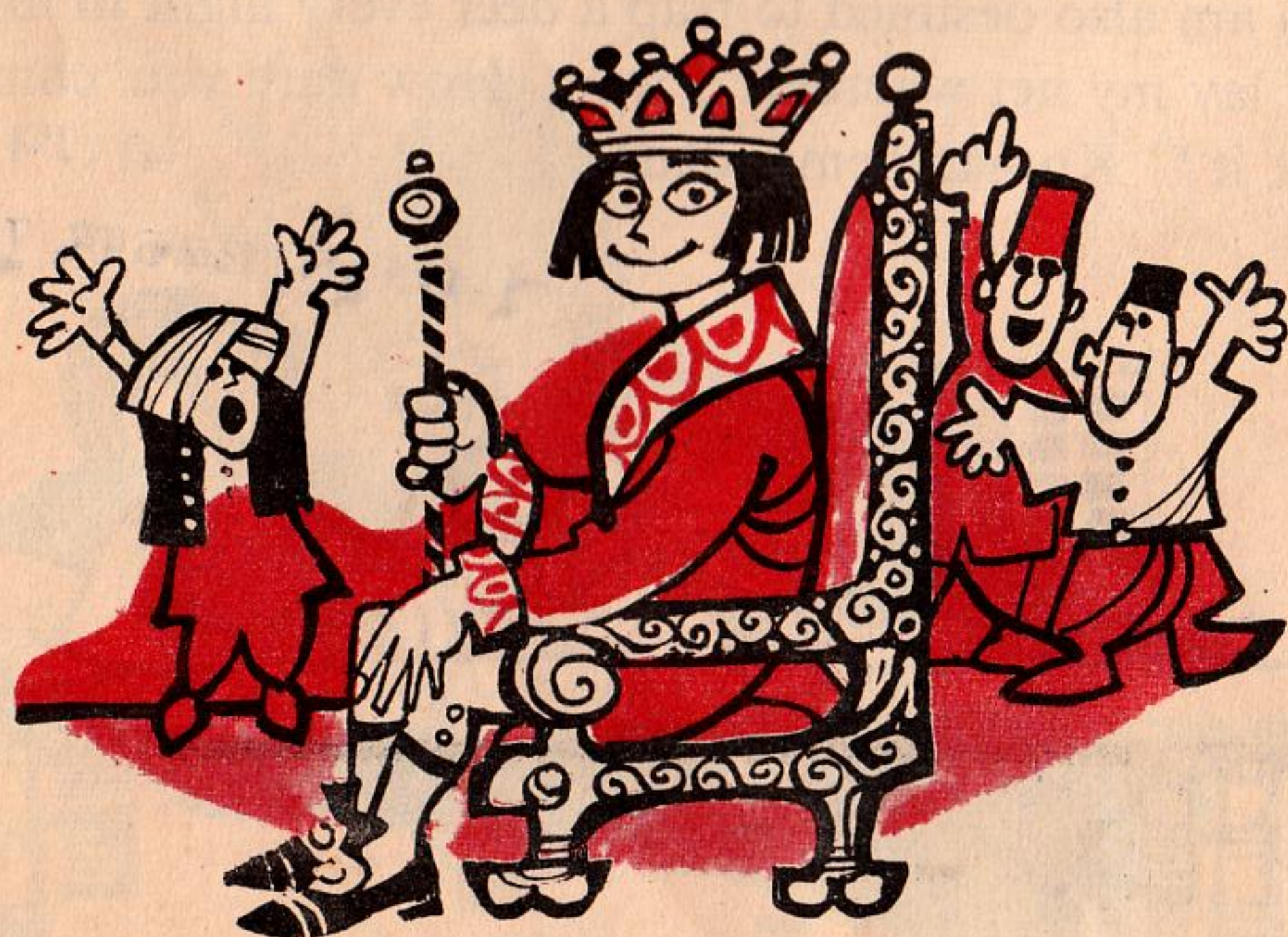
The God of Fate groaned in despair. He brooded for a while. Then he smiled.

"You are very clever. Because of your determination, I will have to rewrite your fate."

That night, the God of Fate erased the old writing from Kumar's forehead and rewrote the events that would occur during his life.

A few days later, there was a revolt and the Prime Minister was killed. Kumar went to the palace and his old nurse recognised him. Soon everyone heard of his return and he was unanimously declared King.

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TWO GIRLS AND A LOTUS

ON TOP OF a three-hundred-foot hill was a quaint old temple. A hunched, old man performed *puja* here. Enshrined in the centre of the temple was a beautiful idol. Usha and Lalita, two good friends, enjoyed talking to the kindly temple priest and watching him adorn the beautiful idol with multicoloured flowers.



Often in the morning, Usha and Lalita climbed the hill, dancing between the rhododendron bushes, jumping, singing and playing hide-and-seek. Woken from its slumber, a dovelet would coo sleepily, "Coo! How noisy these Brobdingnagian doves are!" A squirrel would skip past, flicking its bushy tail and chattering, "Audacity! They dare show me how to play hide-and-seek!" A bright, yellow warbler, flying overhead, would trill, "Silly modern girls! Their frocks are the colour of my undercoat. Are they just trying to tease me?"

But the multicoloured flowers—pink, blue, yellow and purple—that lined the path would sway gently in the breeze and whisper, "Lalita and Usha, we are in full bloom. You can pick us and we shall adorn the lovely idol in the temple yonder!"

Usha and Lalita would happily pluck them—to the dismay of the flittering butterflies, of course—and take them to the priest. The old man would feel the flowers—his eyesight was weak—and guess their names accurately.

He would decorate the idol and chatter with the girls.



"Have you brought jasmines? Fine. God will grant you purity." Or "So today they are roses, aren't they? God will give you love and peace."

One evening, Usha asked, "What if I offered a lotus?"

The priest replied, "Lotus? The queen of all flowers. The lotus is the consciousness of the Lord. When you offer a lotus with devotion, you get nearer to Him. You become a better person."

Usha was delighted. She skipped around joyfully. Lalita looked puzzled. "But where will you find a lotus?" she questioned.

Usha smiled mysteriously and refused to answer. After some coaxing, she reluctantly confided. "Remember the old pond on the other side of the mountain? I saw a lotus bud there. It should blossom by tonight. I will pluck it early tomorrow and bring it here."

"But the pond belongs to my father," protested Lalita shrilly.

Usha had not thought of that before. But she remained adamant. "Maybe," she replied. "But nobody ever goes there. The flower would have blossomed and withered unnoticed. I saw it. So I have a right to pluck it."

"But how? The pond is my father's."

"So what?"

"So only I can pluck the flower."

The two friends parted that evening without smiles.

The next day, dawn was just breaking when Usha approached the pond. She ran all the way while the sky turned from a light grey to a gentle orange. When the



pond was within sight, she was overjoyed—but there was a touch of sadness for her friend. Poor Lalita!

But suddenly her heart almost stopped beating. In the hazy light of dawn, she saw somebody climbing out of the



pond. Yes, it was Lalita and she had the lotus in her hand.

Usha hid behind a bush. Lalita quickly began climbing the hill. Holding back her tears, Usha followed and reflected bitterly on the perfidy of the girl she had considered her friend.

Lalita stood before the priest who had just emerged from bathing in the spring and was about to perform *puja*.

"Who is it?" asked the old man.

"I. I have brought a lotus."

"Lotus? Wonderful! I will put the flower on the idol in your name. It is Usha, isn't it? It's a pity, I cannot see clearly and always confuse Usha and Lalita."

Lalita did not answer. Usha, who was hiding and peeping from behind, could no longer control her tears.

"Is it Usha?" asked the priest again.

Suddenly Lalita replied, "Yes, yes. Please offer the flower to the deity in the name of Usha."

"No," shouted Usha from behind. "*Panditji*, it is Lalita who brought the flower."

"But you discovered the flower. I only plucked it," said Lalita, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"But the lotus was your property," replied Usha, while tears flowed down her cheeks too.

"So what?"

"So only you can offer it to the deity."

Then very gently the priest intervened. "Never mind. I will utter both your names when I offer the lotus to the Lord. He will not object to bestowing His grace on both of you. You shall both be dear to Him. Both of you shall grow to be much better human beings."

On their way back, Usha and Lalita looked and smiled at each other. They felt that they had already become better human beings. They jumped, danced and sang as usual. Once again roused from its sleep, the dovelet cooed drowsily in protest at the disturbance.



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